

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 004005

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: REFERENDUM MARRED BY LOW TURNOUT AND REPORTS OF VIOLENCE

Classified by A/DCM Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) The May 25 referendum on revising the Egyptian constitution to allow for direct presidential elections was characterized by low turnout. Although the process was generally peaceful, there were sporadic incidents in Cairo of government-directed beatings of opposition protestors and journalists. The GOE will have no qualms about claiming a popular mandate for reform on the basis of the referendum results, although it had not yet announced the results as of 1545 hours local time on May 26. We believe, however, that the gratuitous attacks on protestors and journalists--including what multiple sources have characterized as cases of sexually humiliating assaults on women--raise serious questions about how the GOE plans to conduct this year's elections. We received a number of reports of irregularities, including NDP pressure on an NGO to boost the vote in one district, and the ability of individuals to vote multiple times. These issues are illustrative of the many challenges that Egypt will have to overcome if the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections are to be accepted as legitimate by Egyptians and the international community. End summary.

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Attacks on Kifaya Demonstrators and Journalists

¶12. (C) There were multiple eye-witness reports, by wire services, the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune, and the Christian Science Monitor among others, that pro-government thugs, perhaps including undercover security personnel, attacked several groups of demonstrators affiliated with the Kifaya movement ("Enough," formally known as the Egyptian Movement for Change). Although the assaults did not appear to have been delivered with lethal intent, multiple sources, including AP reporter Sarah al-Deeb (who confirmed her experience in a phone call with poloff on the evening of May 25), reported that the thugs' attacks appeared to focus particularly on abusing and sexually humiliating women protestors and journalists.

Anecdotal Evidence Suggests a Modest Turnout

¶13. (SBU) The referendum on amending Article 76 of the Egyptian Constitution, to allow for direct presidential elections, was staged on May 25. Polls opened around 9:30 A.M. local and closed at 7 P.M. Poloff's tour of three polling stations in central Cairo around midday revealed a light but steady stream of voters at two, but the third was station was deserted, except for a handful of police and election officials. At a polling station close to the U.S. Embassy, a TV crew was on hand, filming several members of parliament who had gone in to cast their votes. Posturing in front of the camera, a man carrying a Mubarak placard urged several persons standing nearby to join him in a chant "Yes to Mubarak! Hero of peace and war!"

¶14. (SBU) Observers and other contacts agreed that turnout was low. Most Egyptians we spoke with who went to vote told us the polling stations they visited had relatively few voters. A veteran journalist contact estimated that "actual" turnout was around 30 percent, but conceded this was a hunch based on anecdotal information. The journalist attributed low turnout more to apathy than to the calls of a coalition of opposition parties, the Kifaya protest movement, and the Muslim Brotherhood for a boycott. The official Middle East News Agency asserted that downtown Cairo was "exceptionally crowded" on May 25 and traffic jams were common. Some observers explained the relative quiet by a desire on the part of many prospective voters to steer clear of potential clashes between the opposition and GOE security forces. Comment: The GOE has stated that it has 32.5 million eligible voters on its lists, but most analysts believe that these numbers are unreliable due to poor record keeping, including a pressing need to clean the lists of long-dead voters. End comment.

15. (SBU) One creative Egyptian TV reporter broadcasting from the Qalubiya governorate assured viewers that a high turnout in the cool early morning hours was sapped by the day's heat, "which rather reduced the number of voters." Government-controlled television and radio interrupted most of their regularly scheduled programming with special referendum coverage, with a focus on urging all Egyptians to vote. Commentators on GOE-controlled media criticized the opposition calls for a boycott. Television showed various leading NDP figures, such as NDP Secretary General and Shura Council Speaker, Safwat Sherif, casting their votes.

Tireless Get-out-the-vote Efforts

16. (SBU) If indications of low voter turnout are proven correct (and it will be difficult to ever calculate, with reliability, actual turnout), it will not be because of a lack of GOE effort to mobilize voters. Egypt TV Channel One, which draws by far the highest audience in the country, had included for the two days before the referendum a graphic in the corner of the screen with the slogan "participate with your vote." A huge number of banners had sprung up on buildings, bridges, and signposts around town, many proclaiming "Yes to the referendum! Yes to constitutional reform," but many more simply stating "Yes to President Mubarak, leader of development, progress, and peace", etc. Old habits die hard, and many precinct bosses and local party officials clearly see referenda simply as "Yes to Mubarak" events.

17. (SBU) An enormous banner emblazoned with a slogan exhorting passers-by to "participate with your vote" covered the decrepit high-rise building overlooking the Qasr an-Nil bridge. A number of state TV talk shows hosted guests who talked about the civic responsibility to participate in referenda. GOE and pro-government media commentators strongly attacked proponents of a referendum boycott as "purveyors of passivity - discouraging citizens' participation in public life."

18. (SBU) The GOE's "get out the vote" effort extended from media efforts to much more mechanical and practical processes. Strolling by the Ministry of Health, the Taxation Authority, and the Ministry of Justice, poloff saw thousands of government employees granted early leave streaming out of their buildings and into buses heading to polling stations around midday. The atmosphere was festive, and many had apparently been provided Egyptian flags and pro-Mubarak pennants and placards.

19. (SBU) On the evening of May 24, immediately prior to referendum day, President Mubarak addressed the nation on government television. Mubarak urged the Egyptian people to vote. Egypt, said Mubarak, is in "a decisive moment in our contemporary history and we should all bear the national responsibility, which this moment imposes on us honestly, honorably, and impartially." President Mubarak, along with Mrs. Mubarak and sons Alaa and Gamal, welcomed by Interior Minister Adly and Cairo Governor Abdel Azeem Wazeer, cast their ballots early on the morning of May 25.

10. (C) We gleaned insight into some of the GOE's get-out-the-vote mechanics from the head of an NGO focusing on women and community development, who also happens to be NDP chief for her small district in Giza. She was advised by the party that she would be responsible for getting a "good turnout" in her district. After reaching out to as many women as she could think of in her district, exhorting them to come vote and to bring their families, she duly rented a small fleet of buses which picked up the voters, delivered them to polling stations, and then took them back home. When we inquired whether the NDP had paid for the busses, she said with surprise, "no, the party can't pay for such things...I used funds from my NGO for this." (Note: According to the NGO Law 84/2002, Egyptian NGOs are banned from direct participation in political activities. End note.)

Referendum Logistics and Supervision

11. (SBU) According to the official Middle East News Agency, Egyptians cast their votes in a total of 329 central public polling stations, which were supplemented by an additional 54,350 sub-stations. Interior Minister Habib al-Adly told MENA that the GOE's security services, "operating under the full supervision of the judiciary," were monitoring the polls. According to Justice Minister Mahmoud Aboul Leil, vote counting would be under "full judicial supervision." The Justice Minister asserted that 1,225 judicial officials, including 703 women from the GOE's litigation and administrative prosecution boards, took part in supervising the referendum.

112. (C) At a lunch hosted on May 25 by the Charge for key civil society contacts, most noted that they had not voted and had no plans to do so. All, including the few who had voted, expressed cynicism and skepticism about the GOE's direction of the process. Notwithstanding their criticisms of the referendum process, all of the civil society activists said that they remain committed to pushing for political change in Egypt and are optimistic that has embarked on a reform process from which there is no turning back. The activists all welcomed Embassy Cairo's continuing engagement with and support for Egyptian civil society.

Comment

113. (C) As of 1545 hours local time on May 26, the GOE had not yet announced the result of the referendum, though we do not anticipate that there will be a significant number of "no" votes. Insofar as we anticipate debate about the results, we think that the focus will now shift to a likely GOE claim of high voter turnout, which will be loudly contested by the opposition in light of the considerable anecdotal evidence to the contrary. The opposition will likely seize on the low turnout as evidence of the success of their "boycott." Should the remainder of Egypt's election year be characterized by the same GOE domination of the electoral process, along with the attendant issues of voter apathy and violent harassment of demonstrators and journalists, as seen in the May 25 referendum, the GOE will be hard pressed to persuade the international community and its own people that it is committed to genuine political reform. End comment.

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